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ABSTRACT

Prompted by a concern for the appropriateness of the modes of discourse as a teaching device and in an attempt to elaborate on the registers of writing required of undergraduate students, case studies were made of six college instructors--two each from biology, English, and sociology. The six teachers were interviewed on two occasions, from 1.5 to 3 hours in each session. During the first interview the instructors were asked to discuss a course that they had just taught, or were planning to teach, for students who were beginning majors, but advanced enough to have completed the basic writing requirements of the institution. Documents--in the form of course syllabi, assignment sheets, and student papers--were also solicited. During the second interview, instructors were presented with a tentative model of the role of written language in the course and asked to confirm, reject, or revise the model. The findings suggest that the teacher's reading of student writing is structured around communicative registers. These semantic patterns are conditioned not only by the customary way of speaking, but also by the instructor's view of what the student should be learning. From the biologists' point of view, the basis for student learning is grounded in certainty. In sociology, the emphasis is on the uncertainty produced by the conflict over sociological knowledge. And English instructors seem to base student assessment on their subjective evaluation of the student as an individual reader. (HOD)

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The Function of Writing in Three College Curricula: The Modes of Discourse and the Registers of Writing

Presented at the 74th Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Detroit, November 1984

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RUNNING HEAD: WRITING IN COLLEGE

According to Robert Connors, the four modes of discourse -- narration, description, explanation and persuasion -- described by Alexander Bain in 1866 have been the primary formal devices used for teaching composition to college students. His treatment of their historical development and consequent decline suggests that they were once powerful tools for teaching writing which lost their theoretical force because they became inflexible in their application. Don McAndrew and I are currently conducting an empirical study that suggests that writing instruction in college remains dominated by the modes of discourse.

Another aspect of student writing that has received attention is register. Sarah Freedman has applied the concept of speech registers to explain the judgments of teachers reading student and professional writing. She found that when presented with writing samples containing a mixture of essays by student and professional writers, teacher/readers were not able to agree as readily about their judgments of the professional as compared to student writing. Since the raters were not informed that any of the essays were by professional writers, they responded in the context of teachers reading student writing. After analyzing the essays, Freedman claims that the professionals violated the usual formality of the student-to-teacher register by writing as if the reader were a peer, the relatively less formal register of their usual writing.

Michael Halliday, defines register as a semantic pattern associated with a particular language situation. The situation is made up of a field, or the ongoing activity, a tenor, or the status and role relationships of the participants in the language exchange, and a mode, roughly the medium and style of exchange.

Semantic patterning explains another of Freedman's findings. Basing her

analysis on Searle's taxonomy of speech acts, she found that students tend to answer exam questions in their writing as opposed to real questions. In posing an exam question, the teacher wants to discover how well the student can write. Posing a real question is a request by a speaker for an informative response. Informative as defined by linguist John Lyons means something previously unknown to the receiver. In this sense, Freedman's readers were examiners. Attempts by the professional writers to turn exam questions into real questions violates the semantic pattern dictated by the field of written examinations. The activities some of the professional writers engaged in, overtly searching for anything real about the assigned essay topic or rejecting the question outright, is a severe violation of the status relationships.

The research I am reporting grew out of a concern for the appropriateness of the modes of discourse as teaching devices and an attempt to elaborate the registers of writing required of undergraduate students. Teaching modes in required English composition courses assumes that they reflect the demands of writing in other disciplines. Bazerman has delineated the differing semantic patterns adopted by scholarly writers of seminal works in the humanities, social and natural sciences. What is important about registers, as semantic or text patterns is that they provide information to the reader that conditions expectations of the intended message of the writer. In fact, Halliday believes that communication would be impossible without shared registers. The conformity of student texts to teachers' views of appropriate registers thus conditions the willingness of teachers to comprehend student writing. As a linguistic object, registers function to allow the information content of a text to be embedded in a message that is predictable.

If language functions as both a mode of facillitating communication and a mode of transmitting information, what functions might college teachers impute to student writing? As Freedman, among many others have observed, the major function of students' writing is to permit evaluation of their learning. But, is writing utilized in an evaluative role in all disciplines; and, do the modes of discourse conform to the semantic patterns of registers in different disciplines? The central issue of this study then is: Do teachers in different disciplines assign different functions to student writing?

Functional enquiry, according to linguist Paul Garvin, refers the question of the meaning of human behavior to the participants in the social structure. He employs the term function to refer to two aspects of the human system of interaction, "the functioning of a system as a whole," and the way in which "the elements function with respect to one another."

An understanding of the function of behavior, both in terms of the elements of the system and the system as a whole, depends on participation in and observation of that system. Sociologist Paul Diesing believes that a holistic research method centering on the empirical observation of behavior in the ecology in which it occurs, is necessary because it allows for greater insight into the function of behavior within the total framework of interactions that constitute the boundaries for the behavior under investigation, allowing the observer to view the total scope of behavior in its natural setting, while pursuing questions about the functioning of individual elements within the whole.

Because of the importance of context in examining function, the research reported here was conducted at a single college, a four year public college

in New York State. The institution was selected because of its accessability, its commitment to undergraduate education and the presence of a few graduate programs on campus. Of several institutions considered, faculty and administrators were the most willing to cooperate. Collection of data as extensive as reported here would not be possible for more than a few colleges. In this regard, a sample of five from the over 3,000 colleges in the country would not be any more representative than one. Additionally, this research was considered exploratory and intended to generate ideas for further research as opposed to testing hypotheses. In the collection of data, I followed Diesing's outline of the steps of a case study. First, I explored the available literature, already reported in brief here, text materials for students and documents from the site such as the college catalog.

After initial permission to conduct this study through a telephone interview with one of the college deans, department chairs were contacted. After an initial explanation of the purpose of the study, the chairs were asked to identify two faculty from their departments that were recognized as excellent teachers. The fact that the nature of the project was explained to the department chairs probably encouraged a bias in participant selection since teachers who utilize writing in their classes were more likely to have been identified at the outset. This bias was not considered important since the goal of the study was to describe the uses of writing in different disciplines. Teachers who did not employ writing in any regular or systematic way would have been of little use.

In all, six teachers were selected for participation as informants in this study, two each from biology, English and sociology. This mix was selected to reflect the general areas of knowledge of natural sciences, humanities and

social sciences upon which Charles Bazerman and David Jolliffe base their examinations of writing in different disciplines.

The six participating teachers were interviewed on two occasions, from 1 1/2 to 3 hours in each session, depending upon their availability and willingness. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by an independent typist. Transcriptions were verified by the typist, an independent listener and the researcher on separate occasions. In total, 28 hours of interviews with these primary participants were transcribed into 680 pages of text.

Data Collection

In the first interview, I asked the instructor/informants to discuss a course that they had just taught, or were planning to teach, for students who were beginning majors, but advanced enough to have completed the basic writing requirements of the institution. This distinction was made because it was suspected that a discussion of introductory courses would introduce two biases into the discussion. Introductory courses are typically very large, discouraging the use of written language. Second, introductory courses might not be targeted for majors.

During this first interview, documents, in the form of course syllabi, assignment sheets and student papers were solicited. These were either examined by the informant and me at the time, or put away for the purpose of cross-checking the information from the interview at a later time.

In the second interview I returned to the informants with a tentative model of the role of written language in the course. The informant was asked to confirm, reject or revise this model with me. At the same time, some information

from other informants was cross-checked, and further information to clarify details was solicited.

It was hoped, during this second interview, that the informants would become an integral part of the model building process at my invitation. My efforts to build a model explaining the uses of written language in the discipline and the classroom were tentative with the second interview. Since all of the informants were described as good teachers by at least their department chairpersons, it must be assumed that they would believe they had nothing to hide; there was no reason to avoid honesty in responding to the models. Informants were encouraged to discuss their ideals as well as the situation confronting them.

Model Building

The model building stage of the study, between the first and second interview, requires further explanation. While the transcripts were being typed, I reviewed the tapes several times. Modeling began with the themes that emerged from this repeated review of tapes. At the final stage, a model for each discipline was constructed which included all of the relevant classroom language variables suggested by all the participants. This was framed in the context of the site as a whole and the particular discipline. The models were reviewed with each participant in a series of informal questions intended to verify them and fill in parts that might not have been discussed, but were suggested by other informants.

In addition to the six instructors, I interviewed some other key people. Some of these individuals were administrators and others were faculty. The purpose of these interviews was to solicit information in order to cross check the statements of the teacher/informants and validate the accuracy of specific bits of information.

The exploration of the data from preliminary interviews was conducted according to Kenneth Pike's heuristic procedures for discovery of linguistic structure. The essence ot these procedures is to view the data as single elements within contrastive waves and sequential fields. Each stage, beginning with the individual teacher, moving through the academic department and on to the college as a whole, was modeled by examining contrasts and sequences of elements. The three elements in Pike's system were very useful in creating the final model of the function of writing in college that emerged from the interviews. This systematic perspective on the unsystematic data of this study involved beginning by viewing each writing assignment as a particle, Pike's term for the individual unit. Moving up a level of abstraction, the wave contrasts the particle to other particles. On the next level, the assignments were viewed as sequences within fields. The wave view contrasts the writing assignments of all instructors in terms of the intent for each assignment. The field view places instructors' assignments within their conception of their place in the whole picture of college study at the institution and their discipline as a larger professional community.

Results

All of the participants grounded their discussion of the function of writing in the classroom in the relationship between writing and learning, reflecting one of the most basic principles of curriculum development; the structure of a curriculum depends upon the objectives that the curriculum is designed to teach. All of the participants maintained beliefs about the appropriateness of writing and its place in their disciplines; and, they tied their views about writing directly to the structure of the knowledge they wanted to convey to undergraduates.

Although it will be clear from the discussion following that the informants were unanimous about the need for discipline-specific models of learning, two

factors underlying the separate models, unify them, allowing the construction of a single model of learning across all three disciplines. These two factors are the nature of the knowledge that the undergraduate has to master and the nature of the participating teachers' methods of communicating that knowledge. These two factors form polarities that can be used to locate the participants' conceptions of learning. In the case of knowledge, the poles are certainty versus uncertainty. Each of the disciplines appear to present the undergraduate with differing degrees of verifiability of the knowledge that they must master. In the case of teaching methodology, the poles are externality versus internality. Each of the disciplines also appear to differ in terms of the participants' conceptions of the specifiability of the causal relations between their teaching methodologies and student learning, as well as the verifiability of the results of teaching.

Two other factors appear to play a significant role in the participants' approach to teaching, their commitment to scholarship and the viability of their departments as training grounds for scholars. These factors confound the previous two, because they are not discipline specific aspects of teaching. The participants' commitment to scholarship affects their approaches to instruction because of the limits it sets to their involvement with students. The number of majors, a determinant of class size also dictates the amount of writing that can be used.

Teaching and Learning in Different Disciplines

Student Learning

The biologists' views of undergraduate study in biology places them at one pole of the knowledge factor. As they explained it, the basis for student learning is grounded in certainty. This knowledge was described in relation to writing

as follows:

> They are learning the language in what they are doing.....What are they going to write about? They don't know enough yet to write. And that's not a criticism of the students. It's like learning a foreign language--your German I class. You don't write essays in German I, you are just trying to memorize the verbs and grammar, and that is what undergraduates in biology courses are, many of them, learning a language, memorizing terms, getting the basic information. ....most of my courses are presenting information.

To be fully understood, this statement must be contrasted to a similar summary by one of the sociologists:

> ....the social sciences have bitten very deeply of the fruit of relativism, have moved away from determinism. A lot of students come in, you know these little wide-eyed people, and they want truth...And unfortunately we sociologists present them with an overabundance of riches when it comes to the truth, because we say, "You want a truth, I'll give you four truths, each one contradicting the other one!" It just scares the shit out of them.

This statement about knowledge also led to an observation about what she was looking for in student learning:

> I want them to do two things basically in any class I teach: I want them to demonstrate that they have new knowledge that they didn't have before they took that course, number one. Number two, that they've done something with the new knowledge; they've thought about it...in other words they've done some kind of analytic work in their heads about that new information...

The primary contrast between these two statements is the locus of certainty about the substance of the discipline for the undergraduate. In biology, both participants characterized the substance of mastering the discipline as a matter of memorization, growing out of their view that scientific knowledge is fixed, at least for the undergraduate. In sociology, the emphasis of both participants was on the uncertainty produced by the conflict over sociological knowledge. Both of them used the term analysis to characterize the primary work of the undergraduate when facing this conflict. Like the biologists they expected students to master a body of knowledge, in this case termed sociological theory.

Both of them used the term analysis to characterize the primary work of the undergraduate when facing this conflict. Like the biologists they expected students to master a body of knowledge, in this case termed sociological theory. Unlike the biologists, however, they did not present this knowledge as fixed and unchanging, forcing students to an analytic mode of learning as opposed to memorization.

Dealing with the conflict is inescapable. As one of the sociologists put it:

> Well, you know, I'm a hypocrite because in deviant behavior, you know, we put down the positivistic approach and then we go through and, in terms of the data, I give them all the statistics.

The participants in English also employed the term analysis to characterize the major aspect of mastering the discipline. At no time did they discuss, however, a body of knowledge that they expected students to master.

They suggested that knowledge of English lies in the process of reading a literary work. One of the participants characterized the nature of his goals for students through a comparision of critical reading and writing.

> ...reading literature is a very slow process and very few people, I think, come up with dazzling insights into literature instantly. They read, and they reread, and they think, and they ponder, and they ask questions. They arrive slowly at insights that are rich. Writing, in particular, encourages that kind of, you know, rich insights into literature because writing is a slow process and so is reading.

This description sets the poles of the knowledge factor. Biology has a fixed and unchanging content that is represented to the undergraduate as built on a foundation of certainty. Because there is no content to reading literary works, knowledge cannot be specified apart from the act of reading the work. Sociology lies between biology and English because the nature of knowledge is grounded in conflict.

Teaching Methodology

Teaching biology is primarily giving out information and learning is primarily a matter of memorization. Teaching was predominantly lecturing. Evaluation of student learning was seen as an objective procedure by both of the biologists. One of the participants stated a preference for fill-in type of examination items because they emphasize recall over the recognition skill required for multiple choice examinations. This preference is a particularly enlightening one, since it emphasizes memorization and retention of information. Multiple choice items tend to emphasize recognition of correct statements of fact.

Lectures were combined with class discussion as a method of conveying knowledge of sociological theory and encouraging students to apply it analytically.

The focus of evaluation of the teaching methodology for both of the sociologists was on the objective demonstration that students had new knowledge and a more subjective evaluation of students' work with that knowledge.

The teaching of literature and the evaluation of student learning was intimately tied with the use of writing for this English department. Teaching is indirect, and evaluation is based upon a highly subjective view of the student as an individual reader. Evaluating the student depends not on how much he/she has learned, instead it depends upon the teacher's assessment of the student's private act of reading a literary text.

To summarize, the student of literature faces a teaching methodology that lies beyond definition, in fact, one that can only be defined in the process of doing it. Biology is exactly the opposite, with public knowledge and an external teaching methodology. Sociology lies somewhere in between biology and English because it has a fairly clearly defined body of knowledge for students to master and an inexplicit teaching methodology that requires them to move beyond an egocentric

perspective and see everyday occurrences as public events.

Ultimately, analysis is a fuzzy or mystical term used to define a learning process that cannot be described independently from students' actions. What places sociology between English and biology is the possession by sociology of a body of knowledge that is specificable, although not based on specifiable grounds for certainty. The sociologists were also able to specify how they recognized that students had combined the two parts of learning, theory and analysis to come to new insights.

Participants in English and sociology used the term analysis to label the intellectual work of the undergraduate, while the biologists saw the work as purely memorization. Consequently, the participants in English and sociology used writing -- particularly journals -- as an exploratory tool for students. In English, the journal was rarely discussed directly with the teacher, but was viewed as the springboard of more formal pieces of analytic writing about students' responses to literary works. This second type of writing was viewed as a record of the student's exploration of the text.

In sociology, one of the participants used the journal as a method of fostering the growth of analysis by discussing journal entries. He said,

> There is this battle of getting students to turn....what they see as purely private experience into what a sociologist would call either public experiences or experiences that can be looked at purely in terms of social causes....I want to hear what they observe to be a legitimate, scientific kind of question. I really don't care what your feelings are because we're talking about analyzing and observing, documenting and thinking through and trying to determine which line of argument is more supported by the facts....you get a lot of "Well, I think" and "I feel."

The goal is to use the journal as a tool for turning the student's private perspective into a public one through the application of sociological theory.

Essay exams were also utilized to evaluate students' mastery of sociological

theory and its application.

In biology, the little writing that was sponsored served to evaluate students' mastery of knowledge, although recall type of objective exams -- fill-ins for instance -- were favored over essays. The only other use of writing was to report the results of lab work, a straightforward presentation of procedures and discussion of results, according to the biologists.

To the extent that writing instruction for college students begins from a formalist approach, it could serve to focus attention on textual patterns that are of little utility in writing in other disciplines. The findings of my study, taken together with Freedman's findings suggest that teachers' reading of student writing is structured around communicative registers. These semantic patterns are conditioned not only by the customary way of speaking, but also by the instructor's view of what the student should be learning.

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